

SCENES FROM A CIVIL WAR  
ESCENAS DE GUERRA CIVIL

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Periodically, we seem to witness fleeting revivals of the times when Guelphs struggled against Ghibellines.<sup>1</sup> As in those times, there are now in Italy two camps waging a furious and gruesome battle. And although we call them *fascista* and socialist instead of Guelph and Ghibelline, they intermittently rekindle those medieval days in this thought-provoking and evocative country. They're absorbed in a struggle of ensnarement, ambush, retaliation, and *vendetta*.

The State claims to be impartial in this struggle. But it happens that one of the warring parties dubs itself the defender of State authority. And so the other warring party rejects the claims of its rival's ally, the State.

The two factions aren't equally well known outside of Italy. As one of them, *fascismo*, is new to distant publics, it seems fitting to shed some light on its history.

*Il fascismo* was founded in 1919<sup>2</sup> by Benito

1. Guelph and Ghibelline refer to the two famously antagonistic political factions which, in what is now northern Italy, were fiercely divided during the 13th and 14th centuries on whether allegiance was owed to the Pope (as the Guelphs believed) or to the Holy Roman Emperor (as the Ghibellines did).

2. In March 1919, Mussolini founded the *Fasci italiani di combattimento* in Milan, which in 1921 would become the *Partito Nazionale Fascista*. But this group had a precursor in the 1914 *Fascio d'azione rivoluzionaria interventista*, a WWI interventionist movement in which Mussolini was active.

3. Francesco Nitti (1868-1953) had resigned as prime minister in June 1920, to be succeeded by the political veteran Giolitti, after being unable to form a united liberal government in a time of great political strife exacerbated by the violent and disruptive *modus operandi* of the rising fascist militias. Giovanni Giolitti (1842-1928) was one of the most important political figures in Italy at the turn of the twentieth century, serving as prime minister on five occasions from 1892-1921. After opposing Italy's entry into the World War, he became prime minister for the last time in June 1920, but he was ultimately overtaken by the fascists in power and influence.

4. D'Annunzio (1869-1938), major poet, dramatist, and prose writer who took up with the Italian fascists in his later career. A fervent nationalist, he campaigned for Italy's entry into World War I and fought in the conflict. Mariátegui writes about him elsewhere as one of the literati who set the cultural stage for the rise of in Italian fascism, considering his oeuvre the spiritual precursor and literary face of the movement.

5. As France went to war with Germany in 1914, Raymond Poincaré, President of the Third Republic, called for a *union sacrée*, or sacred wartime union, through which all warring political factions in the parliament agreed to support the state undividedly and unequivocally.

6. Mariátegui does not mention the *fascés*, an ancient Roman symbol of authority which Mussolini's fascist movement, in its characteristic imperial nostalgia, adopted as its emblem. The *fascés*, etymon of the Italian "fascio" and Spanish "haz," were depicted as an axe head protruding from a bundle of wooden rods.

7. *Avanti!* was the official newspaper of the Italian socialists. It was banned by the fascist regime in 1926.

Mussolini and other enthusiastic supporters of intervention in order to promote an expansionist and nationalist platform not only against those in the government who, in their judgment, diminished the value of Italy's victory in the war, but also against those who had opposed intervention. In short, they were equally opposed to Francesco Nitti's pacifism as they were to Giovanni Giolitti's neutralism.<sup>3</sup> Fascism represented a spiritual sequel to the emergence of Gabriele D'Annunzio.<sup>4</sup>

The name *fascismo* derives from the word *fascio*, which during the war referred to the block of national political forces in Italy whose counterpart in France was called *union sacrée*. In Italy's parliament, there was no *union sacrée* of parties, but instead a *fascio* of parties.<sup>5</sup> In other words, what we would call in Spanish an *haz* or "bundle" of parties. So the word *fascismo* has, by virtue of this origin, a nationalist and war-oriented sense.<sup>6</sup>

Benito Mussolini, who brought *fascismo* to life, came out of the rank and file of the socialist party. He was editor-in-chief of *Avanti!*<sup>7</sup> He broke away from socialism during the war because his interventionist ideas led him to join the campaign for Italy's participation in the war. To support this campaign, he created the Milanese daily *Il Popolo d'Italia*, which today

serves as the official mouthpiece of *fascismo*. Mussolini possesses a dazzling talent for polemical writing, and is an eloquent supporter of both Gabriele D'Annunzio the *condottiere* and Gabriele D'Annunzio the politician.<sup>8</sup>

At first *fascismo* operated on a platform focused on foreign policy. It waved the flag of maximum territorial expansion. It extolled the annexation of Fiume and Dalmatia.<sup>9</sup> It glorified the D'Annunzian gesture.<sup>10</sup> It took care to forcefully awaken in Italy that same feeling of victory that gave rise to France's current parliament.

It was later, when this nationalist program consolidated an ardent and fighting multitude around the various *fasci*, that *fascismo* began its armed attack against socialism. Throughout, it situated its actions on a purely nationalist terrain. It characterized its aggressive activities as an affirmation of Italian patriotism against the internationalist doctrines of socialism and anarchism.

The *fascista* phenomenon has since taken on a much greater importance. Today *fascismo* is an anti-revolutionary citizens' militia. It no longer represents just the sentiment of victory. It is no longer just a prolongation of war fever. It now denotes an assault by the bourgeois classes against the rise of the proletarian

8. The late medieval term *condottiere* traditionally refers to a leader of mercenary soldiers.

9. The status of Dalmatia, a region of what is now Croatia, was a source of contention in Italian politics during and after World War I. During the conflict, Italy had hoped to annex all of Dalmatia from Austria-Hungary, but international peace accords ultimately allowed Italy only a small portion of it. Mussolini would lead an invasion of the territory, by then part of Yugoslavia, in 1941. Fiume, now Rijeka, is a port city on the Adriatic coast over which Italy struggled to gain control after World War I.

10. The grand gesture alluded to here refers to the events of 1919, when Gabriele D'Annunzio and hundreds of his followers occupied the port of Fiume and claimed it for Italy. Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti deployed the Italian navy and thereby successfully expelled ultranationalist d'Annunzians. In 1924, under pressure from an Italian government now firmly in Mussolini's grip, Yugoslavia ceded the city of Fiume to Italy. Fiume returned to Yugoslavian control following the 1947 Peace Treaty of Paris.

classes. The bourgeois classes use the *fascista* phenomenon to go out and face off against the revolution. Weary of nervously awaiting the revolutionary offensive, they ditch their passive approach and react preemptively to the revolutionary act. The conservative forces are sure of being able to thwart the revolution once and for all by storming it before it sets out to seize political power.

The socialist forces are not fully participating in the struggle. The socialists taking up arms against *fascismo* do not represent all the militants from the proletarian groups—just the most fanatical and militaristic of the lot. In other words, the vanguard of socialism.

A majority of socialist elements opposes these skirmishes, which, to their thinking, uselessly drain the lifeblood of the proletariat. This majority believes that armed violence must be used only in the decisive assault on power.

The State cannot, of course, be strictly impartial. It can neither approve nor condone the terrorist methods of *fascismo*: setting fire to *camere di lavoro* offices, sabotaging the socialist presses, assaulting rival organizers and propaganda-peddlers, etc.<sup>11</sup> But what is relevant to the *fascista* movement is a movement of the classes who want to preserve it against the

11. First emerging in the late 19th century, the *camere di lavoro* ("chambers of labor") are uniquely Italian, regional labor associations bringing together workers affiliated with diverse trade unions.

classes who want to destroy and take its place. *Fascismo* is the illegal action in defense of the State's survival taken by the conservative classes, fearful of the insufficiency of the State's legal action. It is the illegal action of the bourgeoisie against the possible illegal action of the socialists, namely the revolution.

These shared primary interests make it apparent that a single camp brings together the *fascisti*, who brought about Italy's entry into the war, and the *giolittisti*—the supporters of neutrality at all costs who, before the war, were accused by the *fascisti* of treason, and who later, during the war, were branded defeatists.

*Fascista* activity in the coming elections will largely focus on the prime ministry, as it will be directed, within the monarchic sector, against Francesco Nitti, Giolitti's adversary in that sector and the politician now preparing to storm the ministry, but whose domestic and foreign platform does not widely differ from Giolitti's. The two statesmen share more or less the same understanding of the present moment and possess the same ability to address it.

But the *fascisti* won't budge on Nitti. They won't forget that Nitti was for them the one who diminished the value of Italy's victory in the war. They would rather forget that Giolitti was the enemy of intervention.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: From May 1920 to April 1922, a young José Carlos Mariátegui worked out of Italy as a correspondent for the Lima-based daily *El Tiempo*, which published his series of regular dispatches on Italian cultural and political life. To English-language readers, he will be more familiar for his *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*, a 1928 landmark collection in which Mariátegui decouples Marxist historical analysis from its eurocentric orthodoxies.

Mariátegui's Italian chronicles showcase the writer's earliest political thought, and they predate the more mature political writings of his most productive years, marked by the publication of *La escena contemporánea* in 1925.

Mariátegui arrived in Italy in late 1919 and would remain there in a semi-voluntary exile for almost four years. In May 1919, he founded the leftist Peruvian daily *La Razón*, which denounced the nascent dictatorship of Augusto B. Leguía.

By August of that year, *La Razón* ceased publication under pressure from the regime, which also proceeded to award Mariátegui a scholarship to study in Italy, thus effectively sending him into political exile.

Mariátegui's dispatches from Italy survey a country in political and economic upheaval, still unable to resolve the internal conflicts that had both given rise to and resulted from its entry into World War I. They also bear witness to the rise to power of Mussolini's fascist movement amid the tumult of Italy's infamous *biennio rosso* ("The Two Red Years") from 1919 to 1920.

In these writings, Mariátegui consistently places quotation marks around the term "fascism" and its derivations, conveying the sense of newness and foreignness that the terms still carried when he used them in Spanish. In this translation, I communicate this sense of semantic unfamiliarity through the use of

corresponding Italian words for fascism and related terms.

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